

AUSTRALIA DRAWS CLOSER TO MILESTONE OF 1 MILLION REFUGEE ARRIVALS SINCE WORLD WAR II

The number of refugee and humanitarian entrants welcomed to Australia since World War II is on track to pass 1 million in late 2025. As at 30 June 2023, the number of visas issued since 1947 by the Australian Government through its offshore resettlement and onshore protection processes stood at 958,034. With 20,000 refugee and humanitarian visas due to be issued in the 2023-24 financial year, the total number of humanitarian arrivals will reach 978,000 in June 2024. If the annual program remains at 20,000 visas in 2024-25, the milestone of 1 million humanitarian visas since 1947 will be achieved in the early months of the 2025-26 financial year.

Prior to 1947, refugees arrived in Australia through standard migration processes and no statistics were collected. The Australian Parliamentary Library has estimated the number of refugee arrivals between Federation in 1901 and 1947 at 20,000.ⁱ Australia has had a planned annual Refugee and Humanitarian Program since 1977-78. Since that time, 569,447 refugees have arrived through offshore resettlement programs and 81,183 have been given protection in Australia through asylum processes.

Table 1: Total number of refugee and humanitarian entrants, as at 30 June 2023

Year	Refugee	Special Humanitarian Program	Special Assistance Category	Total Offshore	Onshore	Grand Total
Total since 1947	635,119	206,990	34,742	876,851	81,183	958,034
Total since 1977-78	327,715	206,990	34,742	569,447	81,183	650,630

Bipartisan political support for refugee resettlement

While Australia's two major political parties have varied over the past 20 or 25 years in their policy approaches to people seeking asylum, both Liberal-National Coalition and Labor governments have shown strong support for refugee resettlement over the past 75 years. This is reflected in the Refugee Council of Australia's analysis of the numbers of refugee visas issued by each government since 1947.

Table 2: Refugee visas issued by each government: 1 January 1947 to 30 June 2023

Government ⁱⁱ	Years in office	Refugee visas ⁱⁱⁱ	Annual average	Ranking
Labor 1947-49 - Chifley	2.97	82,532	27,789	1
Coalition 1949-72 - Menzies-Holt-Gorton-McMahon	22.96	206,199	8,981	8
Labor 1972-75 - Whitlam	2.94	7,792	2,650	9
Coalition 1975-83 - Fraser	7.33	110,010	15,008	3
Labor 1983-96 - Hawke-Keating	13.00	168,358	12,951	6
Coalition 1996-2007 - Howard	11.73	148,542	12,663	7
Labor 2007-13 - Rudd-Gillard-Rudd	5.79	85,278	14,728	5
Coalition 2013-22 - Abbott-Turnbull-Morrison	8.68	130,117	14,990	4
Labor 2022-present - Albanese	1.1	19,206	17,460	2
Total - July 1947 to June 2023	76.5	958,034	12,523	

Of the nine governments since 1947, Ben Chifley's Labor Government welcomed more refugees each year than any other. The Chifley Government, which began Australia's largest scale immigration program in the aftermath of World War II, received an annual average of 27,789 refugee arrivals between January

1947 and its election defeat in December 1949. The Menzies Liberal-Country Coalition Government continued a large-scale refugee program for its first two years in office but, from 1952, refugees arrived largely on an ad hoc basis for the following 25 years, in response to international crises.

Malcolm Fraser's Liberal-National Coalition Government was responsible for significant reform of Australian refugee policy, beginning a planned annual Refugee and Humanitarian Program from July 1977 and overhauling Australia's approach to refugee and migrant settlement support in 1978. During its term in office (1975 to 1983), the Fraser Government issued an average of 15,008 refugee and humanitarian visas each year, with the program peaking at 22,545 in 1980-81.

Since the term of the Fraser Government, successive governments have averaged between 12,500 and 17,500 refugee arrivals each year. Although early in its term in office, Anthony Albanese's current Labor Government has had the most generous average annual response over the past 40 years (17,460 visas p.a. so far). The next most generous average annual response was from the recent Coalition government led by Tony Abbott, Malcolm Turnbull and Scott Morrison from 2013 to 2022. During its 8 years and 8 months in office, it issued an average of 14,990 permanent refugee visas each year. During its two-year additional response to refugees from Syria and Iraq, the Turnbull Government achieved a 35-year high of 21,968 refugee and humanitarian visas in 2016-17. Four years later in 2020-21, the humanitarian program fell to a 45-year low, with just 5,947 visas issued by the Morrison Government. Despite these highs and lows, the most recent government issued more refugee and humanitarian visas each year than the Rudd-Gillard Labor Government (14,728 visas p.a.), the Hawke-Keating Labor Government (12,951) and the Howard Coalition Government (12,663).

Table 3: Refugee visas issued by Labor and Coalition governments since 1947

	Years in office	Refugee visas	Annual average
Labor governments from January 1947 to June 2023	25.80	362,680	14,057
Coalition governments from January 1947 to June 2023	50.70	595,354	11,743

A comparison of Labor and Coalition governments since 1947 shows that, on average, Labor governments were more generous in their refugee response, issuing an average of 14,057 refugee and humanitarian visas each year while in office (compared to 11,743 for Coalition governments). However, this difference is largely a result of the high numbers of arrivals during the term of Chifley Government, peaking at 89,199 arrivals in 1949-50. By contrast, the Whitlam Labor Government had the least generous refugee response, welcoming an average of 2,660 refugees a year between 1972 and 1975.

Table 4: Refugee visas issued by Labor and Coalition governments since 1977-78

	Years in office	Refugee visas	Annual average
Labor governments from 1977-78 to 2021-22	19.89	272,841	13,718
Coalition governments from 1977-78 to 2021-22	26.11	377,789	14,469

Since an annual Refugee and Humanitarian Program began in 1977-78, the average annual response has been higher under Coalition governments (14,469 refugee and humanitarian visas p.a.) than under Labor governments (13,718). However, this may change in coming years if the Albanese Government maintains the Refugee and Humanitarian Program at 20,000 places p.a. or increases it further, in line with Labor Party policy.

April 2024

ⁱ Estimated refugee arrivals 1901-1947: Dr Barry York, Australian Parliamentary Library in "Australia and Refugees, 1901-2002: An Annotated Chronology Based on Official Sources", June 2003 (see Chronology 1901-1980)

ⁱⁱ How government terms were calculated: Chifley Government: 1 Jan 1947 to 19 Dec 1949 (47% of 1949-50 year). Menzies to McMahon Government: 19 Dec 1949 to 5 Dec 1972 (43% of 1972-73). Whitlam Government: 5 Dec 1975 to 11 Nov 1975 (37% of 1975-76). Fraser Government: 12 Nov 1975 to 11 Mar 1983 (70% of 1982-83). Hawke-Keating Government: 11 Mar 1983 to 11 Mar 1996 (70% of 1995-96). Howard Government: 11 Mar 1996 to 3 Dec 2007 (43% of 2007-08). Rudd-Gillard Government: 3 Dec 2007 to 18 Sep 2013 (22% of 2013-14). Abbott to Morrison Government: 18 Sep 2013 to 23 May 2022 (90% of 2021-22). Albanese Government: since 23 May 2022.

ⁱⁱⁱ Statistics include offshore refugee and humanitarian visas and onshore protection visas. 33,000 unassisted arrivals evenly distributed over 28 years from 1947-48 to 1974-75.

APPENDIX

Table 5: Australia's refugee and humanitarian arrivals since 1947 ^{iv}

Year	Refugee	Special Humanitarian Program	Special Assistance Category	Total Offshore	Onshore	Grand Total
<i>Unassisted arrivals 1947 to 1975</i>	33,000	0	0	33,000	0	33,000
<i>January 1947 to June 1948</i>	5,138	0	0	5,138	0	5,138
1948-49	33,816	0	0	33,816	0	33,816
1949-50	89,199	0	0	89,199	0	89,199
1950-51	36,912	0	0	36,912	0	36,912
1951-52	4,934	0	0	4,934	0	4,934
1952-53	664	0	0	664	0	664
1953-54	3,248	0	0	3,248	0	3,248
1954-55	1,534	0	0	1,534	0	1,534
1955-56	521	0	0	521	0	521
1956-57	11,070	0	0	11,070	0	11,070
1957-58	6,759	0	0	6,759	0	6,759
1958-59	4,118	0	0	4,118	0	4,118
1959-60	3,969	0	0	3,969	0	3,969
1960-61	3,413	0	0	3,413	0	3,413
1961-62	946	0	0	946	0	946
1962-63	1,375	0	0	1,375	0	1,375
1963-64	2,040	0	0	2,040	0	2,040
1964-65	1,609	0	0	1,609	0	1,609
1965-66	2,177	0	0	2,177	0	2,177
1966-67	1,805	0	0	1,805	0	1,805
1967-68	3,226	0	0	3,226	0	3,226
1968-69	7,613	0	0	7,613	0	7,613
1969-70	16,495	0	0	16,495	0	16,495
1970-71	11,812	0	0	11,812	0	11,812
1971-72	3,259	0	0	3,259	0	3,259
1972-73	2,512	0	0	2,512	0	2,512
1973-74	1,228	0	0	1,228	0	1,228
1974-75	514	0	0	514	0	514
1975-76	4,374	0	0	4,374	0	4,374
1976-77	8,124	0	0	8,124	0	8,124
1977-78	9,326	0	0	9,326	0	9,326
1978-79	12,750	700	0	13,450	0	13,450
1979-80	17,677	2,277	0	19,954	0	19,954
1980-81	20,795	1,675	0	22,470	75	22,545
1981-82	20,195	1,722	0	21,917	0	21,917
1982-83	16,193	861	0	17,054	0	17,054
1983-84	12,426	3,059	0	15,485	0	15,485
1984-85	9,520	4,687	0	14,207	0	14,207
1985-86	7,832	3,868	0	11,700	0	11,700
1986-87	5,857	5,434	0	11,291	0	11,291
1987-88	5,514	5,878	0	11,392	0	11,392
1988-89	3,574	7,735	0	11,309	0	11,309
1989-90	1,238	10,451	0	11,689	726	12,415
1990-91	1,497	8,287	0	9,784	1,500	11,284
1991-92	2,424	4,360	2,363	9,147	2,862	12,009

Year	Refugee	Special Humanitarian Program	Special Assistance Category	Total Offshore	Onshore	Grand Total
1992-93	2,893	2,392	5,657	10,942	903	11,845
1993-94	4,315	2,524	5,840	12,679	1,391	14,070
1994-95	3,992	3,675	5,545	13,212	1,646	14,858
1995-96	4,643	3,499	6,910	15,052	1,200	16,252
1996-97	3,334	2,470	3,848	9,652	2,250	11,902
1997-98	4,010	4,636	1,821	10,467	1,588	12,055
1998-99	3,988	4,348	1,190	9,526	1,830	11,356
1999-00	3,802	3,051	649	7,502	2,458	9,960
2000-01	3,997	3,116	879	7,992	5,741	13,733
2001-02	4,160	4,258	40	8,458	3,891	12,349
2002-03	4,376	7,280	0	11,656	869	12,525
2003-04	4,134	8,927	0	13,061	790	13,851
2004-05	5,511	6,755	0	12,266	912	13,178
2005-06	6,022	6,836	0	12,858	1,286	14,144
2006-07	6,003	5,275	0	11,278	1,739	13,017
2007-08	5,962	5,026	0	10,988	2,026	13,014
2008-09	6,499	4,511	0	11,010	2,497	13,507
2009-10	6,003	3,233	0	9,236	4,534	13,770
2010-11	5,998	2,973	0	8,971	4,828	13,799
2011-12	6,004	714	0	6,718	7,041	13,759
2012-13	11,985	503	0	12,488	7,510	19,998
2013-14	6,499	4,507	0	11,006	2,753	13,759
2014-15	6,002	5,007	0	11,009	2,747	13,756
2015-16	8,284	7,268	0	15,552	2,003	17,555
2016-17	9,653	10,604	0	20,257	1,711	21,968
2017-18	7,909	6,916	0	14,825	1,425	16,250
2018-19	9,451	7,661	0	17,112	1,650	18,762
2019-20	6,422	5,099	0	11,521	1,650	13,171
2020-21	2,053	2,505	0	4,558	1,389	5,947
2021-22	7,233	4,312	0	11,545	1,762	13,307
2022-23	9,760	6,115	0	15,875	2,000	17,875
TOTAL	635,119	206,990	34,742	876,851	81,183	958,034

^{iv} Sources:

- Estimate of unassisted refugee arrivals, 1947-1975: Dr Barry York, Australian Parliamentary Library in "Australia and Refugees, 1901-2002: An Annotated Chronology Based on Official Sources", June 2003 (see Table 2)
- Refugee arrivals, January 1947 to 1974-75: Dr Barry York, op cit (Table 1)
- Refugee and humanitarian entrants 1975-76 to 2015-16: Janet Phillips, Australian Parliamentary Library in "Australia's Humanitarian Program: a quick guide to the statistics since 1947", January 2017 (Table 1)
- Refugee and humanitarian entrants 2016-17 to 2019-20: Department of Home Affairs, "Discussion Paper: Australia's Humanitarian Program 2020-21" (Table 2)
- Refugee and humanitarian entrants 2020-21: Department of Home Affairs, "2020-21 Humanitarian Program Outcomes" (page 1)
- Refugee and humanitarian entrants 2021-22: Department of Home Affairs, "2021-22 Humanitarian Program Outcomes" (page 1)
- Refugee and humanitarian entrants 2022-23: Department of Home Affairs, "2022-23 Humanitarian Program Outcomes" (page 1)