

Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Migrants

Who is an asylum seeker?

An asylum seeker is a person who has fled from his or her country and seeks legal and physical protection (asylum) as a refugee in another country. People who have fled from their homes but remain in their own country are called Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). Asylum seekers usually try to reach a country which has signed the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951). Australia was one of the first countries to sign this international law which sets out the rights of refugees across the world including the right to seek asylum when there is a well-founded fear of persecution.

Asylum seekers arrive by plane and boat. Some arrive as students or tourists with the appropriate documentation. Others come without documentation or with false papers. Some come with their families. Others come alone. All are seeking protection.

Who is a refugee?

A refugee is a person who has fled his or her country and cannot return because of a well-founded fear of persecution due to their race, religion, nationality or membership of a particular social group. Fear of persecution is the basis of refugee claims. Persecution occurs when human rights violations or threats are sustained or systematic, and governments either fail to protect or, in some cases actively participate in the violations. Refugee status is assessed by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees or a sympathetic country. In Australia people who are accepted from overseas as refugees are permanently resettled. Those who arrive as asylum seekers are given three year Temporary Protection Visas after their refugee status is verified.

Refugees are forced to flee their own countries out of fear for their lives and liberty. Their own governments have not protected them. The decision to leave may be very sudden and often they cannot farewell those who are close to them. They leave with minimal belongings, sometimes only the clothes they are wearing. The journey may be fraught with danger and family members may be lost or die en route. Refugees cannot maintain ties with their homeland for emotional, social and financial needs.

Who is a migrant?

A migrant is a person who has left his or her country voluntarily to make a new life in a new land. In Australia people who are accepted as migrants are granted permanent residence and have similar rights as Australian citizens.

Migrants make a conscious choice to leave their own countries to live abroad. They can still count on the protection of their own government. The journey is planned and they are able to farewell family and friends. They can choose and pack the belongings they wish to take with them. Migrants can always go home if they choose and are usually able to contact family and friends in their country of origin for support.

Who is an illegal immigrant?

An illegal immigrant is usually a person who has arrived on a legal visa but overstays. Most illegal immigrants in Australia are from western countries such as the USA and Great Britain. They are not seeking asylum in Australia. Asylum seekers become illegal immigrants only if their claim to refugee status fails. More than 80% of all asylum seekers who have arrived in Australia by boat have been assessed as refugees. The others are deported either to their home or another country.

Source: Roads to Refuge: Refugees in Australia [kit] Session 1

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<https://www.racismnoway.com.au/teaching-resources/anti-racism-activities/lesson-ideas/journeys-from-afar/>

