

Over a Century building welcoming pathways: the history of USCRI

For 114 years, the *U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants* (USCRI) has acted as a beacon of hope for refugees, immigrants, and forcibly displaced people around the world, regardless of their circumstances. In 2024, this commitment reached new heights, with over 139,000 individuals supported across all 50 U.S. states, as well as in El Salvador, Honduras, Kenya, and Mexico.

1. USCRI's support to vulnerable populations in the U.S.

USCRI was not conceived from a government mandate, but from a profound act of compassion and solidarity. In 1911, Edith Terry Bremer opened the first International Institute in New York City to provide social and legal services to immigrant women and girls, paving the way for the organization's current mission. Edith's work was sparked by the growing number of immigrants in the U.S.; between 1900 and 1915, more than 15 million immigrants arrived in the United States. In 1910, three-fourths of New York City's population were either immigrants or first-generation Americans. The immigrants arriving were mainly Italians, Russian Jews, and Canadians, as well as smaller new communities from China, Portugal, Poland, Lithuania, the Balkans, and the West Indies. These groups primarily immigrated due to economic opportunities, religious and political persecution, poverty, and educational opportunities.

At the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), Edith conducted a survey of the situation of immigrant women in New York City and learned the extent of their needs. By founding the International Institute, she gave immigrant girls and women access to English classes, recreational activities, as well as housing, employment, and citizenship support. In 1920, The International Institute of New York is succeeded by the Foreign Language Information Service (FLIS). By 1924, there were 55 International Institutes in the United States, primarily in the industrial northeast, Midwest, and in California- the state with the highest immigrant population.

In 1934, FLIS became the Common Council for American Unity (CCAU) and launched the *Common Ground*, a quarterly journal publishing fiction and non-fiction works stressing cultural pluralism and ethnic harmony, paradoxically, in the context of the Great Depression that diminished the immigration in the U.S.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, Congress passed the Displaced Person Act of 1948, allowing for the admission of 400,000 displaced Europeans into the United States. This fundamentally transformed the role of the USCRI network agencies as they were recruited—among other organizations—to support this process in a resettlement partnership that lasts to this day. Also, USCRI published the first book on U.S. citizenship *How to Become a Citizen of the United States*.

Most of the displaced people admitted under the 1948 Act were refugees from Eastern and Central Europe, including large numbers of Poles, Ukrainians, Latvians, Lithuanians, and Estonians. Many had been uprooted by war, persecution, or the Soviet occupation of their homelands, and were unable or unwilling to return. They came to the United States seeking safety, freedom, and the opportunity to rebuild their lives. Upon arrival, they were resettled across various parts of the country, often in urban centers or areas with labor shortages, including cities in New York, Illinois, and

Pennsylvania, as well as more rural communities in the Midwest. The USCRI network agencies played a key role in facilitating their integration by securing housing, employment, and community support.

The Refugee Relief Act allowed 214,000 refugees from communist persecution in Eastern Europe to enter the U.S. Throughout the cold war period, the Organization played a central role in supporting people fleeing from the following nationalities: Hungarians, Czechs, Cubans, and later, Vietnamese and Cambodians in the aftermath of the Vietnam War.

In 1958, the organization was institutionalized as the *American Council for Nationalities Services (ACNS)*. The ACNS professionalized the network's support for refugees and immigrants, while expanding its legal and social services.

In 1981, the ACNS merged with the *U.S. Committee for Refugees*, an organization committed to refugee protection and documentation, to bring to the organization policy expertise and data driven advocacy with an international perspective. Together they add up to the implementation of the Refugee Act of 1980, which facilitated the support to the resettlement of millions of refugees from the Balkans, Central Africa, Iraq and beyond.

By 1994, the organization became Immigration and Refugee Services of America (IRSA), reflecting its deepened focus on global displacement and human rights. During this period, it launched campaigns against long-term encampment of refugees and expanded support for asylum seekers and vulnerable children (see USCRI's humanitarian mission in Africa).

Following the September 11, 2001, attacks, it bravely resumed refugee resettlement in a highly restrictive climate.

In 2004, IRSA adopted the name U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), and expanded its mission to include not only resettlement, but also legal protection, anti-trafficking services, and community integration across multiple continents. In 2005, it launched the National Center for Refugee & Immigrant Children, providing legal and social support for unaccompanied minors, and in response to the devastating tsunami the year prior, USCRI opened a field office in Bangkok, Thailand to assist refugees.

Later, in 2011 USCRI received two grants: The first from the Office of Refugee Resettlement to provide Home Study (HS) and Post Release Service (PRS) to unaccompanied migrating children, and the second to add up to the Trafficking Victim Assistance Program (TVAP).

From supporting Eastern Europeans in the early 20th century to Vietnamese, Cambodians, and East Africans fleeing war, genocide, ethnic cleansing, and persecution, to unaccompanied children from Central America driven by gang violence and poverty, USCRI has provided vital services. Today, USCRI offers holistic services related to residential care, refugee support, anti-trafficking, legal advice, refugee health, and child support.

2. Resettlement Efforts After the Vietnam War 1955-1975 (1975 and onwards)

After the fall of Saigon in 1975, the U.S. accepted hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese refugees. USCRI, then operating under the name *International Social Service*, American Branch, helped coordinate and provide resettlement support; this included housing, job placements, English language education, cultural orientation.

3. Support for Indochinese Refugees (after the Vietnam War)

USCRI continued to assist Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian refugees who arrived in the late 1970s and 1980s, including the "boat people" who fled by sea under dire conditions. These groups were fleeing a combination of war, persecution, and political upheaval that followed the Vietnam War and the broader conflicts in Southeast Asia during the 1970s. USCRI worked with U.S. government agencies (like the Office of Refugee Resettlement) and local communities to support long-term integration.

4. USCRI's humanitarian mission in Africa and the Middle East.

USCRI has long supported **Somali** refugees (due to civil war and famine) through advocacy, resettlement, and monitoring efforts. It has strongly advocated for the extension of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Somali nationals in the U.S., helping prevent deportation to unsafe conditions. USCRI also provides critical resettlement services—including housing, employment, and healthcare—through its network of affiliates. Internationally, USCRI monitors conditions in Somalia and refugee-hosting countries, reporting on the challenges faced by displaced Somalis to inform humanitarian response and policy.

After the Genocide in Rwanda which led 800,000 deaths in 100 days, in 1996 USCRI launched the Umuryango project to provide scholarships and school supplies for orphans.

Also, USCRI supports refugees from the **Democratic Republic of Congo**, fleeing armed conflict and human rights abuses, primarily through resettlement programs in the U.S., helping them integrate into communities like Vermont, Iowa, and Ohio. USCRI also advocates internationally by raising awareness about the ongoing conflicts and humanitarian crises in the DRC. Additionally, they collaborate with local organizations to provide cultural orientation, employment assistance, and community support, helping Congolese refugees rebuild their lives and thrive in their new environments.

USCRI supports the resettlement and integration of **Eritrean and Sudanese** refugees in Des Moines, Iowa, who are fleeing dictatorship and violence in their home countries. Internationally, USCRI advocates for the protection and resettlement of Eritrean refugees in safe third countries, particularly those affected by the conflict in northern Ethiopia. Additionally, USCRI emphasizes the importance of neighboring countries to Sudan in ensuring the protection of refugees and returnees amid ongoing crises.

In **Ethiopia**, USCRI stood up for people displaced by ethnic conflicts and political instability through advocacy actions urging governments and international organizations to increase assistance and resettlement opportunities. In the U.S., USCRI helps Ethiopian refugees rebuild their lives by providing services such as housing, employment support, legal aid, and cultural orientation through its network of affiliates.

USCRI has historically supported refugees from **Liberia and Sierra Leone**, particularly during and after the civil conflicts that afflicted both countries in the 1990s and early 2000s. During a site visit to Sierra Leone in October 2000, USCRI found that chronic shelter shortage contributed to overcrowded conditions in displacement camps. In consequence, the Organization encouraged donors to provide sufficient international assistance to alleviate this situation. Also, USCRI

urged Sierra Leonean government officials to encourage internally displaced persons from safe government-held areas to return home to alleviate overcrowding in camps.

In the early 1990s, USCRI was appointed by the U.S. Department of State to resettle 2,000 **Kurdish refugees** from Northern Iraq.

In 2021, USCRI and its network of agencies resettled nearly 10,000 **Afghans** during the Operation Allies Welcome (OAW) of the U.S government that gave humanitarian parole to 76,00 evacuated Afghans.

5. **USCRI's work in favor of displaced communities on contemporary European conflicts.**

During the **Bosnian War** (1992–1995), USCRI actively assisted individuals fleeing ethnic cleansing and violence. By the end of 2001, Bosnia hosted over 9,000 refugees from the former Yugoslavia, including ethnic Serbs from Kosovo, Roma, and Sandjak Muslims. Many were accommodated by host families or in UNHCR-run reception centers. USCRI monitored these populations and advocated for their rights and protection. In 1992, USCRI opened a field office in Zagreb, Croatia to offer educational and psychological services to displaced Bosnian and Croatian children through project Prijatelj (Croatian word for “friend”).

The **Kosovo conflict** (1998–1999) led to the displacement of approximately 1.8 million people. USCRI responded by tracking the movements and conditions of displaced persons, including ethnic Albanians, Serbs, Roma, and other minorities. USCRI also highlighted the challenges faced by displaced populations, such as limited access to services and ongoing ethnic tensions, and called for increased international support. USCRI additionally facilitated the resettlement of vulnerable groups, including ethnic Serbs and Roma, to safer areas or third countries in the case that return was not feasible.

In more recent times, **Ukrainians** who have been displaced by the war following Russia's 2022 invasion, found relief in USCRI's support, which encompasses various services aimed at facilitating the resettlement and integration of Ukrainian individuals and families into communities across the United States.

6. **Latin America & the Caribbean**

USCRI historically supported **Cuban** refugees fleeing political repression under the Castro regime and **Haitians** fleeing poverty, political unrest, and natural disasters. In fiscal year 2024, the Organization reported serving over 42,571 Cuban or Haitian entrants through health services. Highlighting its ongoing commitment to Cuban communities, USCRI also engages in policy advocacy to protect the rights of Cuban refugees. For instance, during periods of political unrest in Cuba, USCRI has issued situational updates and policy snapshots to inform stakeholders and advocate for humane treatment of Cuban migrants. Additionally, USCRI has condemned policies that restrict access to asylum and has called for the protection of individuals fleeing persecution.

USCRI has actively opposed the revocation of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for **Venezuelans**, and it has provided information and resources regarding the humanitarian parole process for Venezuelans, highlighting the limitations of

such programs and advocating for more comprehensive support. Through its network of affiliates, USCRI offers legal aid, housing assistance, employment support, and cultural orientation to help Venezuelan refugees integrate into American society. The organization continues to advocate for policies that protect the rights and well-being of Venezuelan migrants and refugees.

7. The Mexican experience: From Habesha Project to USCRI LAC

Founded in 2015, the Habesha Project was created to facilitate access to higher education for Syrian refugees affected by the Syrian civil war. In 2016, the Habesha Project helped eight Syrian nationals travel to Mexico to begin their university education. In 2019, Habesha Americas was launched in partnership with the *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)* to support young refugees in Mexico who were displaced from their home countries in Central America and Venezuela due to gang violence and internal crisis, by providing them with access to higher education. Currently, both programs have 41 active students in collaboration with a strong network of allied universities in Mexico.

Adapting to the evolving needs of people on the move, the organization expanded its activities, becoming *Mexican Intercultural Dialogue (DIME, in Spanish)* in 2021. That same year, the U.S./MX Border program was established in Tijuana in partnership with USCRI, offering pro bono legal assistance to those in situations of mobility in the U.S.-Mexico border region. In partnership with the *International Organization for Migration (IOM)*, the program has since strengthened the capacity of shelters along the border. In 2022, DIME also launched the Welcoming Communities program to mobilize university students across Mexico, promote refugee integration, and drive systemic change in Mexican civil society.

8. A new strategy for the region: USCRI opens its regional office for Latin America and the Caribbean.

In May 2024, DIME and its programs became part of USCRI, serving as USCRI's Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean. This transition marked a significant step in expanding USCRI's activities and strengthened its presence in Latin America. By continuing to forge partnerships with higher education institutions, international organizations, government agencies, civil society, and the private sector, *USCRI LAC* is advancing its mission across the region. Today, USCRI LAC also coordinates the programs that are being implemented in Honduras and El Salvador.

9. Honduras and El Salvador: Safe, dignified and sustainable reintegration.

Since 2015, *USCRI El Salvador* has equipped Salvadoran youth returnees to successfully rebuild their lives through the Safe, Dignified and Sustainable Reintegration program (REDII, in Spanish). This initiative provides clients with the professional training necessary to enter the job market and contribute to the economic development of their country of origin. After recognizing the need for holistic reintegration services in Central America, USCRI expanded in 2022 to San Pedro Sula, Honduras to launch a livelihoods program for Honduran youth returnees.

USCRI supports the clients of these programs with a three-month stipend to cover transportation and meals while they attend their professional training. In addition, USCRI facilitates job placement upon completion of training. It is worth noting that a great number of clients have started their own ventures relating to diverse fields.

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