

# Commentary: Immigrants and refugees: Why care?

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Immigration—a hot topic today—is at the origin of our faith and is breathing new life into Christianity in the United States.

In Genesis 12:1, we read of God calling Abram to “go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” From that time on, the people of God moved from one place to another, often under duress. Not even Jesus was exempt from immigration nor were his parents exempt from seeking refuge (Matthew 2:13-23).

Given the biblical record, Christians ought to care a great deal about immigration and refugees, and according to a [Lifeway Research poll](#), pastors do care. Eighty-six percent of Protestant pastors in 2016 agreed that “Christians have a responsibility to care sacrificially for refugees and foreigners.” However, only 8 percent of their churches were involved in refugee ministry locally, 19 percent internationally.

Despite what pastors reported, [an older study](#) shows only 9 percent of Protestants say religion is the biggest influence on their views of immigration.

Worse still, Matthew Soerens of World Relief states, “Just 12 percent of evangelical Christians say their views on the arrival of refugees and other immigrants are primarily informed by the Bible.”

One might ask, “If the Bible is not a Christian’s primary influence in thinking about immigration, then what is?”

Before answering this question, it might be helpful to define immigrant and

refugee.

## **Immigrants and refugees: Who are they?**

According to Webster's Dictionary, an immigrant is "a person [who] comes to a country for the purpose of permanent residence." Immigrants are not tourists or visitors; they are people seeking permanent residence.

Ironically, it's the permanence that may cause some people concern. It's ironic because every person living in North, Central or South America is an immigrant or the descendant of immigrants—even if some are more recent immigrants than others. Permanency is what all our ancestors sought.

[A refugee is](#) "someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence [and] has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so. War and ethnic, tribal and religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their countries."

Definitions only go so far, however, because our thinking about immigrants and refugees—who the Bible often calls foreigners or strangers—rarely is determined by definitions.

## **Economics forms some thoughts on immigrants & refugees**

Some are concerned immigrants and refugees will take their jobs. The following statistics about the economic impacts of immigration are taken from a presentation from the [Evangelical Immigration Table](#).

- [Forty percent](#) of Fortune 500 companies were founded or cofounded by an immigrant or their child.
- [Twenty years](#) after arrival, the average refugee adult has contributed approximately \$21,000 more in taxes than they have received in governmental assistance and services at all levels.
- Almost all economists believe that the net economic impact of immigration on the United States is positive, including 96 percent of economists surveyed by the [Wall Street Journal](#) who believe the net economic impact of *illegal immigration* is positive.
- While undocumented immigrants cannot receive federal means-tested public benefits, they can and do pay taxes: In Texas, contributing [\\$1.6 billion](#) in state and local taxes in 2010; Federally, contributing [billions of dollars](#) annually—from which they cannot benefit—to Social Security.
- Immigrants make up about 14 percent of the overall U.S. population but are 95 percent of victims of labor trafficking and 17 percent of sex trafficking victims in the nation, according to analysis of the U.S. Dept. of Justice Prosecution Data by the [Faith Alliance Against Slavery and Trafficking](#).

## **Fear forms some thoughts on immigrants & refugees**

Many believe immigrants and refugees are more violent and prone to crime than U.S. citizens. The following statistics, also taken from Soerens' presentation, put immigrant and refugee crime into perspective.

- “Refugees admitted through the U.S. Refugee Admissions program already are subjected to the most thorough vetting of any category of visitor or immigrant to the U.S.”
- “Since the [Refugee Act of 1980](#), no Americans have lost their lives

in a terrorist attack perpetrated by a refugee,” according to a report by the Cato Institute, a conservative think tank. Furthermore, “the odds of the average American being killed by a refugee-turned-terrorist are 1 in 3.6 billion.”

- “Immigrants are [incarcerated at lower rates](#) than U.S. citizens: 1.53 percent for native-born U.S. citizens, 0.47 percent for lawfully present immigrants, and 0.85 percent for unlawfully present immigrants,” according to another report by the Cato Institute. The incarceration rate for unlawfully present immigrants includes their being charged with improper entry.
- “While the unlawfully present population tripled from 1990 to 2013, [violent crime rates fell](#) by 48 percent nationally,” according to analysis of FBI data by the American Immigration Council.

## **Ministry & mission opportunity among immigrants & refugees**

Perhaps immigrants and refugees are not who we think they are or even who we are told they are.

Many immigrants and refugees coming to the United States are already Christians, and among those who are not Christians, there is a receptivity to the gospel of Jesus Christ. A [2015 Pew Research Center report](#) says that as the number of self-described Christians in the United States declined between 2007 and 2014, the percentage of evangelical immigrants increased.

Timothy Tennett, president of Asbury Theological Seminary, said, “The Chinese, the Korean, the Latino [in the U.S.]—these groups are the most likely to either be Christians or become Christians. ... Eighty-six percent of the immigrant population in North America are likely to either be Christians or to become Christians. ... The immigrant population actually

represents [the greatest hope](#) for Christian renewal in North America.”

For this great hope to become reality requires people to get to know immigrants and refugees. Unfortunately, the majority of people from a non-Christian faith tradition say they do not personally know a Christian. Conversely, very few evangelical Christians have [personal relationships](#) with people of another faith in the U.S.

Though only 12 percent of evangelical Christians in the United States form their thoughts about immigration around what the Bible says, the vast majority believe the Bible tells Christians to “go and make disciples of all people, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything [the Son has] commanded” (Matthew 28:19-20).

This same Bible tells us all people are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27); that God loves the foreigner living among us and that we are to love that foreigner, too (Deuteronomy 10:17-19); and that we should not oppress the foreigner or the poor because we were once foreigners and poor (Exodus 22:21, Leviticus 19:33-34, Zechariah 7:9-10, Jeremiah 22:3, Malachi 3:5).

This same Bible tells us of a tradition begun when Israel settled in the Promised Land, a tradition commanded by God, who told the Israelites to set aside their first fruits and to give that tenth to “the Levite, the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that they may eat in your towns and be satisfied” (Deuteronomy 26:1-12).

This same Bible tells us to submit to earthly authority (Romans 13:1) and to show hospitality, sharing with the Lord’s people who are in need (Romans 12:13). Followers of Christ are expected to do both.

This same Bible tells us we may be entertaining angels when we show hospitality to strangers (Hebrews 13:2).

Even more, this same Bible records Jesus' warning and encouragement to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned, and invite the stranger in because in doing this for "these brothers and sisters" of his, we do it for him.

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