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The UN Refugee Agency



RESETTLEMENT AS A LIFELINE

CANADA, UNHCR AND THE PROTECTION OF AT-RISK REFUGEES

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COVER PHOTOGRAPH:
A UNHCR staff member assists a single mother and her daughter at the boarding gate of Tripoli airport. They are among 17 refugees leaving Libya on a resettlement flight to safety. © UNHCR/Ilham Elayat.

Separated from their family at a young age, Abdullah, 19, and Dana, 17, grew up under the care of the Government of Jordan. When Abdullah turned 18, he was legally recognized as Dana's custodian, opening the door for UNHCR to help the siblings begin a new chapter through resettlement in Canada. © UNHCR/Marine Dondaine

INTRODUCTION

Resettlement is life-saving and life changing. Yet, the reality is that there are far more refugees in need of resettlement than resettlement opportunities that States are willing to provide. As a result, resettlement is a tool of protection for refugees with the greatest need worldwide. Canada makes an important contribution to addressing these needs through its government-assisted refugee (GAR) program.

This paper will demonstrate that Canada's resettlement program is a lifeline for refugees UNHCR identifies from all over the world who are facing acute protection risks. Section 1 describes the role of resettlement as a protection tool. Section 2 outlines UNHCR's role as a resettlement referral organization to Canada. Using UNHCR data, Section 3 highlights the geographic reach of Canadian resettlement and Section 4 provides an overview of the protection needs being addressed through the resettlement referrals to Canada. Lastly Section 5 provides more detailed data on the refugees submitted through Canada's Human Rights Defender and Urgent Protection Program streams.

01

RESETTLEMENT AS A PROTECTION TOOL

Resettlement serves a variety of functions, including as a strategic tool to leverage other solutions or protection dividends for refugees beyond those who are resettled. [1] The following are recognized as its core functions:

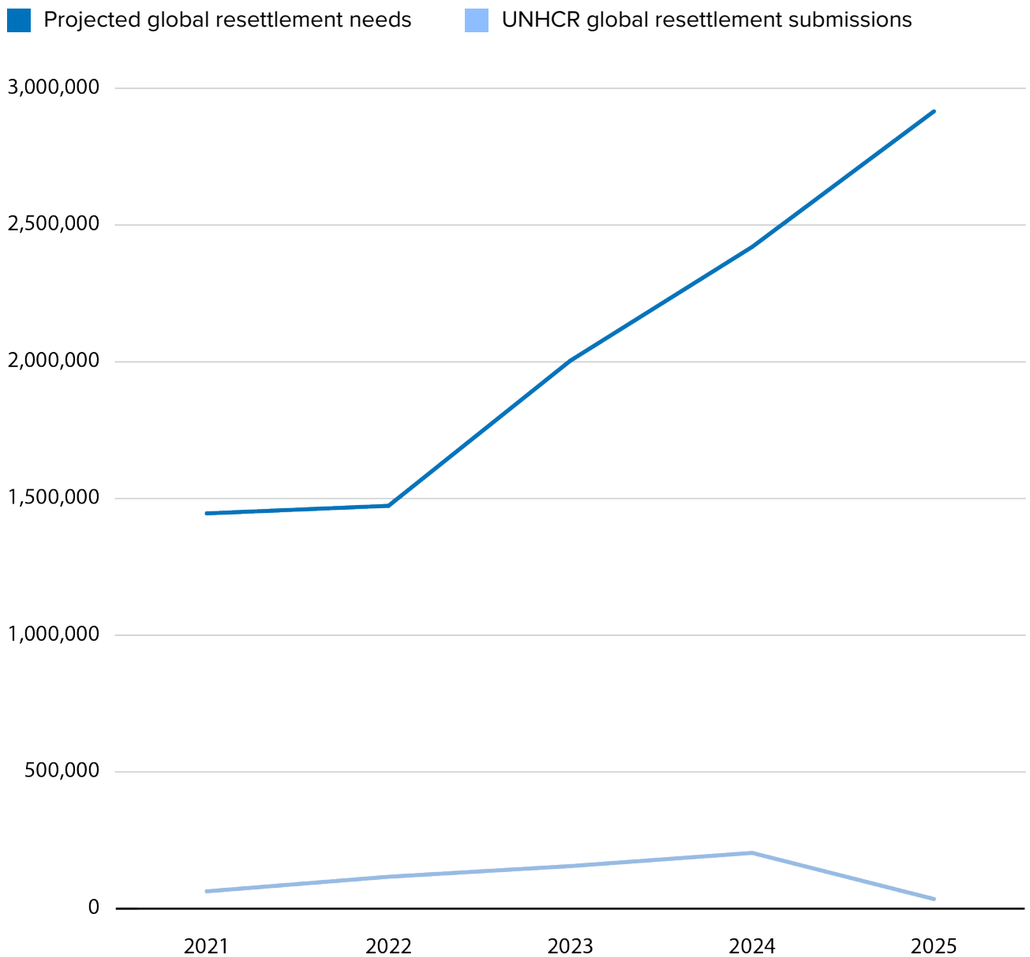
"First, it is a tool to provide international protection and meet the special needs of individual refugees whose life, liberty, safety, health or other fundamental rights are at risk in the country where they have sought refuge. Second, it is a durable solution for larger numbers or groups of refugees, alongside the other durable solutions of voluntary repatriation and local integration. Third, it can be a tangible expression of international solidarity and a responsibility-sharing mechanism, allowing States to help share each other's burdens, and reduce problems impacting the country of first asylum." [2]

For UNHCR operations, this first function is key. Resettlement provides a powerful tool to address and resolve serious protection problems or unmet specific needs for refugees in their respective country of asylum who also cannot return home. Quite simply transferring a refugee to a country of resettlement removes them from the serious harm they otherwise face. With so few resettlement opportunities, resettlement referrals become focused on those with the greatest need for this solution, despite the reality that many others could also benefit from it if more opportunities were available. Figure 1 demonstrates this gap. Even though resettlement needs grew year over year from 2021 to 2025, the number of resettlement submission spaces, based on the number of people States were willing to receive, peaked at less than nine percent of the needs during this period.

[1] UNHCR, "Working Group on Resettlement Discussion Paper: The Strategic Use of Resettlement", 12 October 2009, https://www.refworld.org/reference/confdoc/unhcr/2009/72245.

[2] UNHCR, "Global Consultations on International Protection/Third Track: Strengthening and Expanding Resettlement Today: Dilemmas, Challenges and Opportunities", EC/GC/02/7, 25 April 2002, https://www.refworld.org/policy/strategy/unhcr/2002/49735, pp. 1-2.

Figure 1: Gap Between Projected Resettlement Needs and Resettlement Submissions | 2021-2025[3]



[3] Sources: UNHCR, Projected Global Resettlement Needs 2021 – 2025 and UNHCR, "Refugee Data Finder – Key Indicators," accessed June 10, 2026, https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics.

02

UNHCR AS A RESETTLEMENT REFERRAL ORGANIZATION TO CANADA

With the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA), 2002, along with the related regulations and operational guidance, Canada increasingly prioritized protection needs in the selection of refugees for resettlement to Canada. While UNHCR and Canada have collaborated on resettlement since UNHCR's establishment in 1950, IRPA explicitly designated UNHCR as a resettlement referral organization[4] making it the key source of resettlement referrals for the GAR program.[5]

Even though UNHCR refers refugees to Canada for potential resettlement, it is Canada who decides whether a refugee is admitted. UNHCR and Canada coordinate as to the total number of resettlement referrals each year that UNHCR operations will make to Canada for its consideration. This number is then broken down by UNHCR country operations in order to guide the location and timing of resettlement referrals throughout the year. The decisions concerning the locations and targets for such referrals are linked to a combination of factors including resettlement needs, UNHCR's local capacity and Canadian resettlement processing capacity at each respective Canadian visa office. Other factors may also have an influence, such as coordinating with other resettlement countries who may be selecting refugees from the same population or Canadian or multilateral strategic priorities.

[4] Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations, SOR/2002-227, s. 138.

[5] This includes referrals to Quebec's 'Personnes réfugiées prises en charge par le gouvernement' program. UNHCR referrals are also a source for the Blended Visa Office Referred program.



Smiles all around as Nafissatou and her children begin their new life in Canada. Photo courtesy of Nafissatou.

When a UNHCR operation identifies a refugee(s) that it believes to be in need of resettlement, it provides a dossier for the respective resettlement country outlining the refugee's identity, family, refugee claim, need for a durable solution and specific needs. In some instances — particularly large refugee movements — information provided or processes used by UNHCR are simplified, such as the few times Canada has undertaken "group processing"[6] or more recently during Operation Syrian Refugee. Nevertheless, irrespective of the modality of a resettlement referral, a Canadian official must decide if the refugee(s) being referred meets Canadian eligibility and admissibility requirements[7] which ultimately determines whether they will resettle to Canada.[8]

[6] See UNHCR Resettlement Handbook, sec. 4.5, "Group processing", https://www.unhcr.org/resettlement-handbook/4-managing-resettlement-activities/4-5-group-processing/.

[7] For a summary of Canadian requirements including security, criminal and medical screening, see UNHCR Resettlement Handbook: Country Chapters – Canada: https://www.unhcr.org/resettlement-handbook/resettlement-country-chapters/.

[8] While statistics are not available on the final acceptance rates for resettlement referrals from UNHCR to Canada, UNHCR's Resettlement Statistics Report shows an initial acceptance to process UNHCR submissions ranging from 98% - 99% annually from 2021 to 2025.

03

CANADA'S GLOBAL REACH

Canada's resettlement program is notable, in part, because it helps refugees from many different countries and regions around the world. It is not limited to just a few nationalities or locations. This approach allows UNHCR to address protection needs globally by referring refugees from wherever the need is greatest.

While Canada has had commitments to specific nationalities within its resettlement program, each year UNHCR's resettlement referrals to Canada include refugees from a variety of nationalities and locations. In 2025, UNHCR referred over 13,000 refugees for Canada's resettlement consideration, comprising 72 nationalities from 62 countries of asylum.[9] These resettlement referrals corresponded with some of the largest refugee crises facing the international community (Table 1).

Together, refugees from the top five countries of origin made up 69% of the resettlement referrals UNHCR made to Canada in 2025.

UNHCR resettlement referrals also came from a broad number of countries of asylum. While the top five (Bangladesh, Lebanon, Egypt, Türkiye, Ethiopia) all host significant refugee populations, together they only made up 47% of all the countries of asylum from which refugees were referred to Canada, with 57 other countries accounting for the remainder. All of the top countries of origin and asylum represented in referrals to Canada were also among those identified by UNHCR as having the highest global resettlement needs.[11] This demonstrates that resettlement referrals to Canada are closely aligned with areas of greatest need.

Table 1: Top Five Countries of Origin of UNHCR resettlement referrals (in persons) to Canada | 2025 [10]

Country of Origin	Resettlement Referrals (in persons)
Sudan	2,786
Myanmar	2,415
Syria	1,648
Afghanistan	1,231
Democratic Republic of Congo	1,105

[9, 10] Based on UNHCR registration data.

[11] For 2025, the top resettlement needs by country of origin are #1 Syria, #2 Afghanistan, #4 Myanmar, #5 Sudan, #6 Democratic Republic of Congo; the top countries of asylum are #1 Lebanon, #3 Türkiye, #4 Ethiopia, #7 Bangladesh, #12 Egypt. See UNHCR, Projected Global Resettlement Needs 2025.

04

ADDRESSING PROTECTION NEEDS THROUGH RESETTLEMENT

While it is logical that there is often a correlation between the largest displacement crises and the nationalities being resettled, focusing on nationalities can also be misleading. It is important to recognize that the resettlement referral spaces Canada allocates to UNHCR operations translates into their use for refugees who have the most acute protection needs or vulnerabilities.

When a refugee experiences a protection problem or has an unmet need in a country of asylum there are a variety of potential responses (e.g. utilizing the local police/courts, increased security measures, relocation within the country, etc.). However, when the protection mitigation measures are ineffective, resettlement is often the only viable protection response.

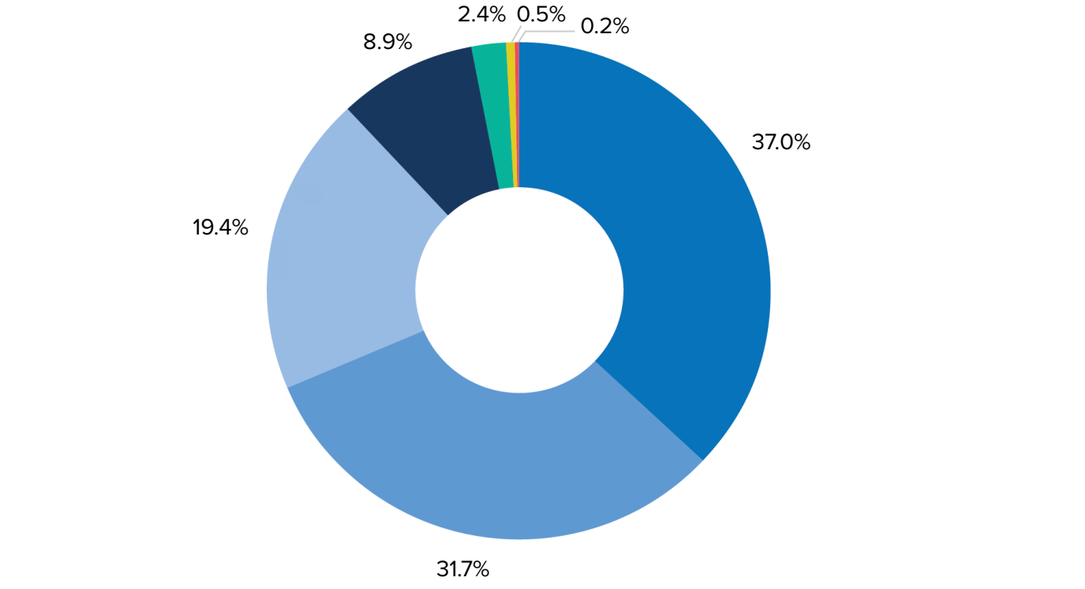
UNHCR's registration database documents protection threats that refugees face while in a country of asylum which, in the most serious cases, may lead to a resettlement submission. A review of these threats for resettlement referrals to Canada highlights the serious protection risks these refugees faced.

For example, of the refugees referred to Canada by UNHCR from 2020-2025, 4,980 were flagged as survivors of sexual or gender-based violence (SGBV), including those facing threats of forced marriage or female genital mutilation (FGM). 9,019 refugees were identified as children at risk, including those at risk for not being able to attend school or who were engaged in child labour in order to support their families. Specific legal and physical protection needs were flagged for 58,500 refugees submitted to Canada during the same period, over 500 of whom were at risk of removal to the country from which they fled and almost 3,400 were detained in the country of asylum for overstaying their visas or other immigration violations.

To support uniformity of referrals to all resettlement countries and equity in terms of access to resettlement, UNHCR and the resettlement receiving countries developed seven categories of circumstances requiring resettlement, to which each individual referral is linked.[12]

The most common categories for resettlement submissions to Canada are: Legal and/or physical protection needs, survivors of violence and/or torture, and women and girls at risk. For the period 2020-2025, these three were the primary categories for 88% of the refugees referred to Canada.

Figure 2: UNHCR Resettlement Referrals by Submission Category | 2020-2025 [13]



[12] The resettlement submission categories are: Legal and/or Physical Protection Needs, Women and Girls at Risk, Children and Adolescents at Risk, Survivors of Violence and/or Torture, Medical Needs, Restoring Family Unity, Lack of Foreseeable Alternative Durable Solutions. For a detailed description, see UNHCR Resettlement Handbook, Chapter 3: Resettlement Submission Categories, https://www.unhcr.org/resettlement-handbook/3-resettlement-submission-categories/.

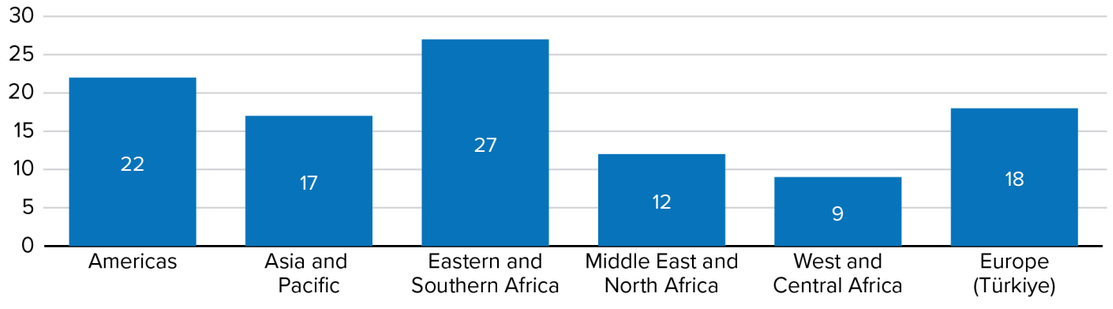
[13] Source: UNHCR registration data, primary resettlement categories.

05

DEDICATED RESETTLEMENT STREAMS LINKED TO SPECIFIC PROFILES OR PROTECTION RISKS

In 2021 the Government of Canada established a dedicated refugee resettlement stream for **human rights defenders (HRD)**[14] as part of its GAR program. UNHCR referred 277 refugees through this stream in 2025. Like other resettlement referrals, the refugees referred by UNHCR under the HRD stream reflect a wide variety of nationalities (28). As seen in Figure 3, HRD referrals come from all regions of the world.

Figure 3: Regional Distribution of Human Rights Defender Referrals (cases) | 2025 [15]



[14] IRCC describes a Human Rights Defender as persons who, individually or with others, “act to promote or protect human rights through peaceful means, such as by documenting and calling attention to violations or abuses by governments, businesses, individuals or groups. HRDs face persecution at the hands of both state and non-state actors, including arbitrary arrest, detention, threats, torture, enforced disappearance and assassination.” IRCC, Canada doubles resettlement spaces for human rights defenders, July 2023, https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2023/07/canada-doubles-resettlement-spaces-for-human-rights-defenders.html.

[15] Source: Based on a review of UNHCR case records.

The refugees that UNHCR has identified as being in need of resettlement and referred to Canada under the HRD stream reflect a broad variety of HRD profiles (see Figure 4).

These trends have been consistent over the years. While there is a wide variety of activists admitted through this stream each year, the most common areas of activism of refugees referred under the HRD over the past four years concern journalism/social media, women's rights, ethnic rights, LGBTIQ+ rights and political/pro-democracy, providing a crucial lifeline for these activists.

With IRPA, Canada also launched its **Urgent Protection Program (UPP)** within the GAR program for emergency protection referrals from UNHCR. IRCC set out eligibility requirements, processing benchmarks and an annual quota. Almost 25 years later, the program remains in place providing a vehicle for expedited processing of those refugees with the most acute protection needs. Its quotas and processing benchmarks have been adjusted over the years, with Canada currently agreeing to consider the referral of 500 refugees each year under this program.

In order to be referred by UNHCR under the UPP, in addition to meeting Canadian eligibility and admissibility criteria, a refugee must: be in urgent need of protection meaning that their life, liberty or physical safety is under immediate threat and, if not protected, the person is likely to be killed; subjected to violence, torture, sexual assault or arbitrary imprisonment; or returned to their country of nationality or of their former habitual residence.

This stream also has global reach. In 2025 alone, UNHCR's UPP referrals represented 41 nationalities and referrals were made from 48 countries of asylum. No single nationality made up more than 15% of submissions, reflecting the diversity of referrals and global need of the program.[16] No country of asylum accounted for more than 10% of all cases.

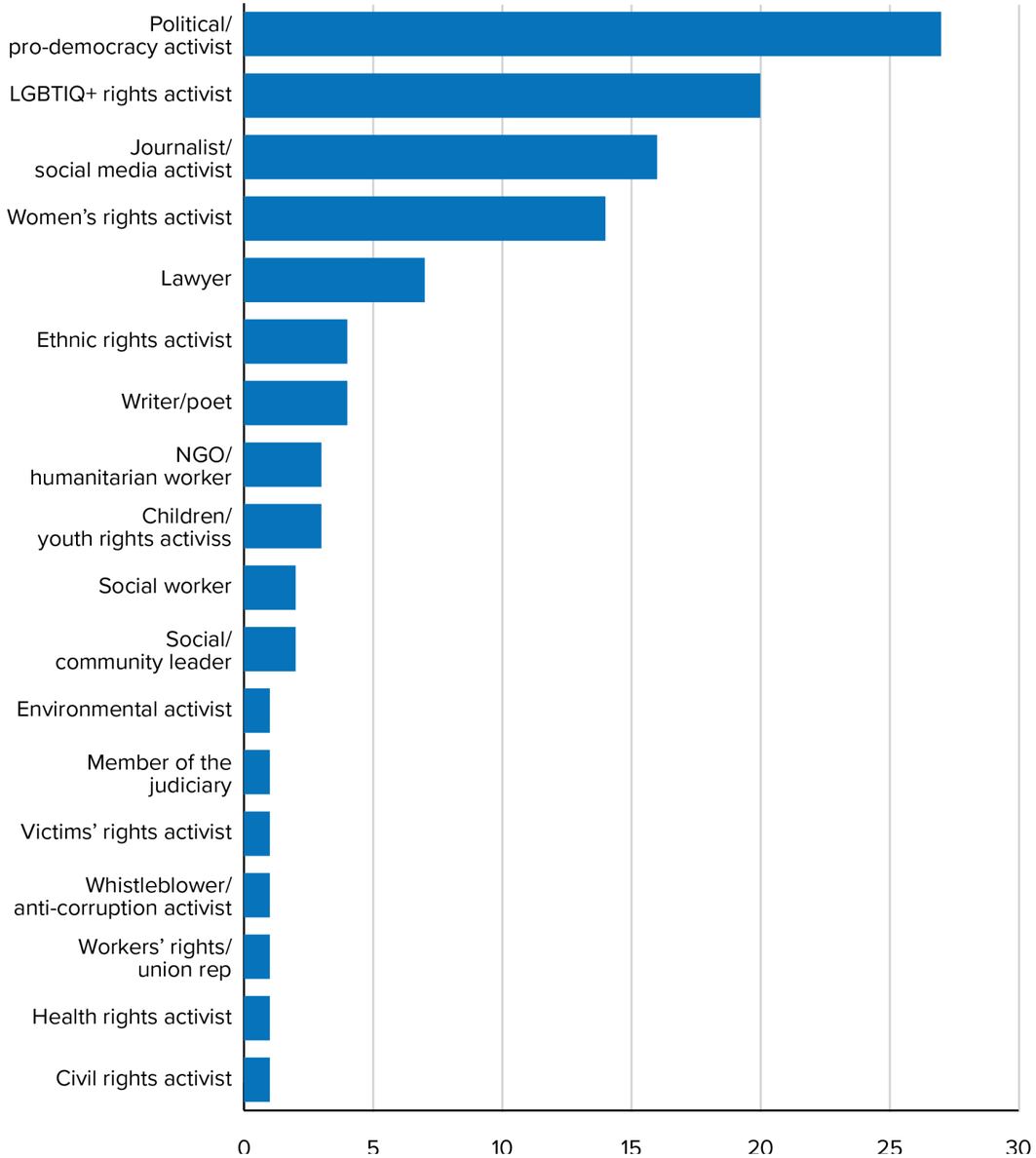
This shows both how the UPP responds to a diversity of protection needs and how multiple UNHCR operations are utilizing this tool to address emergency and urgent resettlement needs, as well as the capacity of Canadian visa offices around the world to process such pressing needs.



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[16] Source: Based on a review of UNHCR case records.

Figure 4: Human Rights Defender Profiles (cases) | 2025 [17]



[17] Source: Based on a review of UNHCR case records.

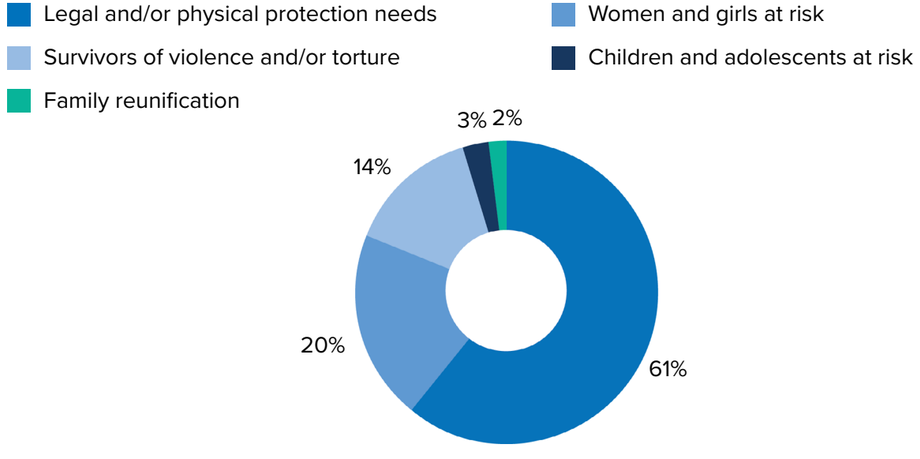
Expectedly legal and/or physical protection needs is the category cited for the clear majority of UNHCR UPP referrals in 2025 given the nature of the UPP. This has always been the case. Looking at cases referred under the UPP as far back as 2010-2012, legal and/or physical protection needs are cited in 75% of the UPP cases submitted during this period.[18]

The specific needs, or underlying reason for referring the case under the UPP, that are noted in Figure 6 provide a window into the sort of imminent harm that refugees referred under the UPP face in their respective country of asylum. It shows the breakdown of specific needs listed in cases submitted under the UPP from 2020-2025.[19]

The list of specific needs outlined in Figure 6 help bring into focus the serious protection challenges facing refugees referred to Canada through the UPP. For the year where data was captured, the large majority of refugees submitted by UNHCR under the UPP are survivors of violence and/or torture. The preponderance of refugee referrals identified as at risk of refoulement/abduction or at risk of harm by non-state actors, demonstrates the severe legal and physical protection problems that refugees submitted under the UPP face. This trend is consistent with previous UNHCR research.[20]

It is also worth noting the high percentage of women and girls at risk and refugees at risk of sexual violence among those submitted under the UPP, reaching 30% of submissions for women at risk and 20% for risk of sexual violence for some years. The UPP has also shown itself to be an important tool for protecting LGBTIQ+ at risk refugees. From 2020-2025, 20% of UNHCR's UPP case referrals were for such at risk refugees.

Figure 5: Urgent Protection Program Submission Categories [21]



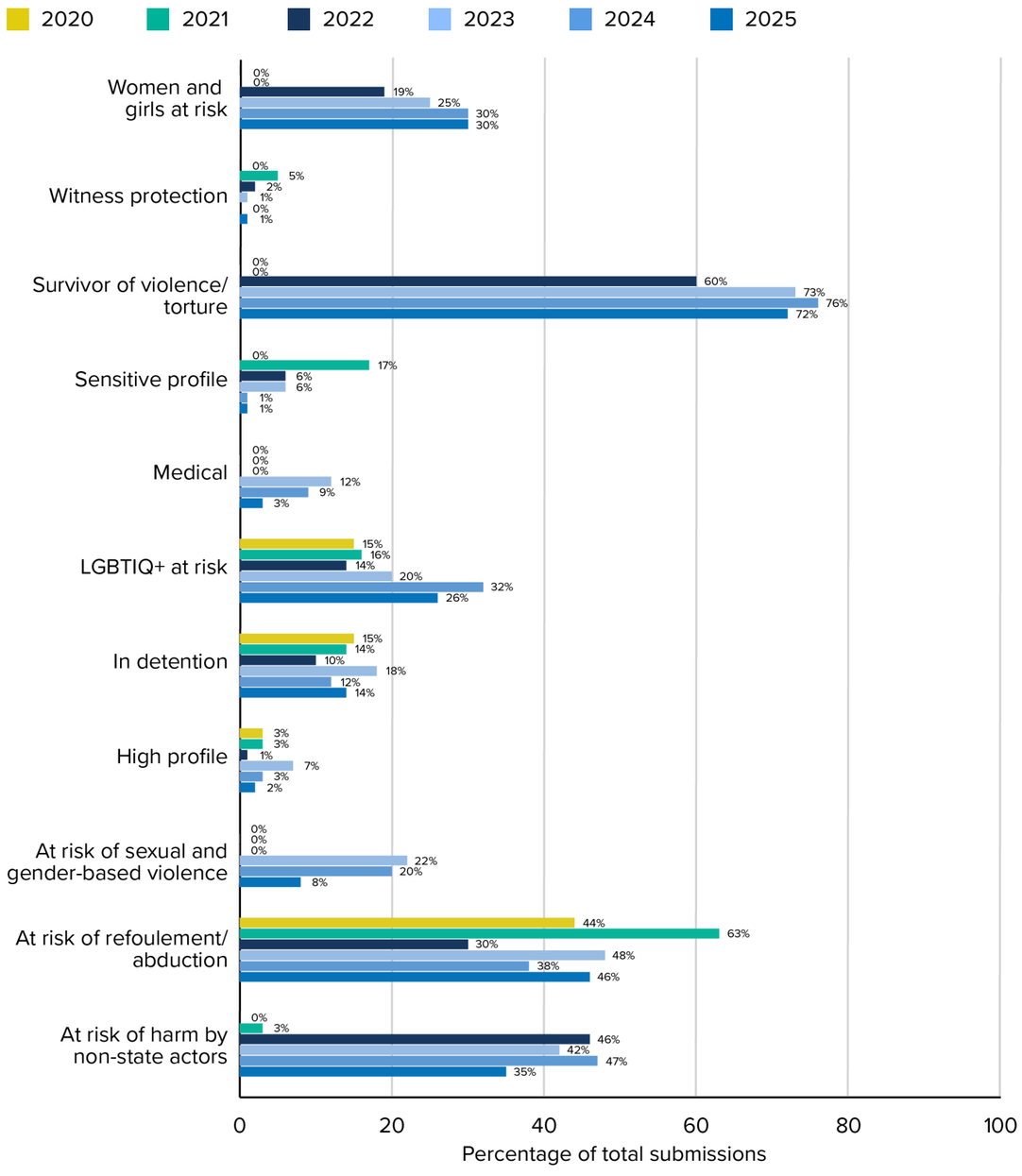
[18] UNHCR, Emergency submission to Canada 2010-2012: Observations and trends analysis, paper prepared for the 2013 Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement, p. 4.

[19] Note that many cases often have more than one specific need. For years prior to 2022 certain specific needs indicators not tracked resulting in zero percent for that year.

[20] UNHCR, Emergency submission to Canada 2010-2012, p. 4

[21] Source: Based on a review of UNHCR case records, primary resettlement categories.

Figure 6: Specific Needs of Urgent Protection Program Referrals | 2020-2025 [22]



[22] Source: Based on a review of UNHCR case records.

CONCLUSION
RESETTLEMENT SAVES LIVES

This paper provides a snapshot into the life-saving nature of Canada's GAR program. It provides a means for UNHCR and Canada to protect refugees through resettlement who are experiencing or are at risk of serious human rights abuses or vulnerabilities in their respective country of asylum. The program is not limited to one particular nationality or location but rather plays a life-saving role in protecting some of the most at-risk refugees from around the world. While the nationalities of those resettled often reflect some of the largest refugee crises of our times, their experiences in their respective country of asylum provide a more accurate reflection as to why they were identified for resettlement. The seriousness of the specific needs of those identified for the UPP demonstrates why this program has been so critical to those who benefit from it.

Resettlement is also life changing. Refugees re-acquire rights lost and are given the opportunity to build a new life in Canada. Experience shows that refugees thrive when given this opportunity and also contribute to Canada.[23] The HRD stream shows that resettlement to Canada can also provide an opportunity for Human Rights Defenders to continue their advocacy from the safety of Canada.

The document began by noting the gap between resettlement needs and the number of resettlement spaces. Currently UNHCR estimates some 2.4 million refugees are in need of resettlement, yet the quotas provided by countries are the lowest in two decades.[24] This document provides a reminder of the powerful impact each resettlement space provides for those who are able to benefit from this durable solution and demonstrates why more spaces are needed.

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[23] See UNHCR, Refugees Are Good for Canada, 2026, https://www.unhcr.ca/in-canada/refugees-are-good-for-canada/.

[24] UNHCR, "UNHCR calls to expand refugee resettlement lifeline as part of global solutions drive", Briefing Notes, 16 June 2026, https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing-notes/unhcr-calls-expand-refugee-resettlement-lifeline-part-global-solutions-drive.

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